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AUTHOR Haroldsen, Edwin O.; Blake, Reed H.
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INSTITUTION Brigham Young Univ., Provo, Utah. Dept. of Communications.
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ABSTRACT

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(Author)

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TRANSMISSION OF NEWS IN THE
TURKISH VILLAGE

by

Edwin O. Haroldsen

Department of Communications

and

Reed H. Blake

Department of Sociology

Brigham Young University

Provo, Utah 84601

International Communication Association

Phoenix, Arizona

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Abstract

In the traditional Turkish village, the coffee house acts as a modern-day parish pump in news transmission. Within the coffee house, there is evidence of a two-step flow of communication. The role of the influential in this process is the same as that in other studies: as a mediator and interpreter of news. In social characteristics, however, there are some differences. Taken together, the coffee house and the influential can be viewed as a communication relay channel. This relay channel displays characteristics of both an oral and a media communication society.

TRANSMISSION OF NEWS IN THE TURKISH VILLAGE

Lerner notes that people who live together in a common polity develop patterned ways of distributing information, as of distributing other commodities.¹ This distribution varies from society to society; yet, at the same time there is cultural variation there is often cultural similarity, as different social systems pass through like stages in the development of their communication systems.

In communication research, most of the work has been conducted in the United States. Beyond that, much of the remaining research has been in other mass societies, such as Great Britain.

With prediction as the end result of all scientific endeavor, the bulk of the communication investigations to this point may, in fact, have little relevance for many emerging nations which have yet to reach the stage of a mass society.

This paper is an exploration into the patterned ways of distributing information in the traditional villages of a society in transition. Since, as Lerner notes, all societies move in a direction from oral to

¹Daniel Lerner, "Communication Systems and Social Systems," in Schramm (ed.) Mass Communications (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1960), p. 131.

media systems (no known case exhibits change in the reverse direction),² the study can have a two-fold benefit: (1) it may suggest earlier stages in the development of modern, mass societal communication systems, and (2) it may shed new light on the communication systems of societies whose roots are still in the oral systems, yet display elements of the media systems.

Study Locale

The transitional society selected for study was Turkey. An ancient country, it is only now displaying many of the cultural traits of a modern society. It does, at the same time, show much evidence of a folk society.

In an attempt to understand the transmission of news in a traditional Turkish village, four villages of varying differences were selected for investigation. They were visited by the senior author over the period of June 30 to July 18, 1970. The four villages were:

Barbaros (pop. 1,000), a village of tobacco growers situated on a peninsula approximately 40 miles west of the Turkish Aegean seaport city of Izmir. A prosperous village, it has about 150 families, of which 80 per cent are said to have radios.

²Lerner, p. 133. "We have identified two main types of public communication systems--media and oral...the differences are as follows:

	Media Systems	Oral Systems
Channel	Media (Broadcast)	Oral (Point-to-Point)
Audience	Mass (Heterogeneous)	Primary (Homogeneous)
Source	Professional (Skill)	Hierarchical (Status)
Content	<u>/Descriptive/</u>	<u>/Prescriptive/</u>

See pp. 131-133.

Gaziemir (pop. 10,000), a village of approximately 2,000 families which lies about 10 miles east of Izmir. It was once strictly a village of tobacco growers and their families, but now many commute by dolmush (shared taxicabs) to factory jobs in Izmir.

Akyurt (pop. 1,300), a village of 180 families 20 miles north of the Turkish capital of Ankara. The village subsists on wheat, sugar beet, and vegetable farming. Many families in this village have transistor radios.

Sarakoy (pop. 700), another farming village north of Ankara (about 15 miles). It has about 100 families. The main crops are grain and alfalfa. Many families here have their own radios.

Results

Two major aspects of news transmission emerged in the investigation. The first major aspect was the presence--with variation--of an old communication concept, the parish pump. The parish pump, as a type of primary communication activity, is associated with women, where oral news is disseminated within or around some recognized physical setting. Initially this was the parish pump; today its counterpart is such places where women habitually meet to exchange information: outside a church, a social club building, and, to a lesser degree, the beauty salon, among others.

The Turkish village has its parish pump in the form of coffee houses. The variation is that it is men--not women--who exchange news in these settings.

Typically, Turkish village men spend many hours in the company of other men. It is not uncommon to see men loafing in the coffee houses, drinking tea, coffee, or buttermilk and playing dominoes, while village women work in the fields.

In the Turkish village, then, the coffee house performs two functions:

1. It serves as a place for men to come for refreshment and relaxation.
2. It serves as a place for men to exchange information.

The importance of the coffee house as a parish pump can be better realized when one understands that only in Turkey's largest cities are newspapers delivered to homes.

By contrast, in the villages, newspapers are read and exchanged in the coffee houses. A typical coffee house will subscribe for several copies of several newspapers from the large cities such as Izmir, Istanbul, and Ankara. While some read silently in the coffee house, many men read aloud for those who want to listen. Beyond the newspaper, some coffee houses will also have a radio and, in rare cases, if they can receive a signal, a television set to receive the limited TV programming in that country.

News, which comes to the villagers in the form of private letters, is also exchanged. And, finally, village residents who view news events in cities where they go to market their farm products or to shop relate such news by word of mouth on their return home.³

In summary, the coffee house occupies a central position in the patterned ways of distributing information in the Turkish village. It is that vital link where news emanating from the mass media is rechanneled into the interpersonal communication networks.

The second major aspect that emerged from the investigation was the presence of the influential--again with a variation--as conceptualized in the two-step flow of communication theory.

It is, of course, a natural thing that when news was received and exchanged in the Turkish village coffee house, it would also be discussed. Once news began to be discussed, it is also only natural that some men would play a more important role than others in this discussion. This is the influential, those individuals who, through day-to-day personal contacts, influence others in matters of decision and opinion formation.⁴

³For example, Mehmet Vahdettin, a relatively well-to-do farmer who runs dairy cows and sheep and farms 1,000 acres of land in the vicinity of Sarakoy village north of Ankara, drives his car to Ankara to market his milk every day. He reported witnessing student demonstrations in Ankara and telling villagers about them on his return home.

⁴Charles R. Wright, Mass Communication (New York: Random House, 1964), p. 54.

From studies conducted in the United States, the influential is viewed as operating basically in the informal, interpersonal networks of communication. Their influence rests not so much upon some position in the formal structure of society as it does upon the influential's personal capabilities.⁵

As with any village, the Turkish village has a social structure. Some of the more clearly defined status-roles in the village are those of the muhtar (the village leader or president), the hoja (the local Moslem priest), the doctor, the school teacher, the proprietor. Rank,

⁵In the rural areas of America, the farmers who tended to be influentials were better educated, read more farm magazines and extension bulletins, were more active in formal organizations such as cooperatives, PTA's, and churches, and, at the same time, more different kinds of groups, and were more active in statewide and countywide organizations than were farmers in the other three groups. The influential farmer tended to be more cosmopolitan in his outlook, and much more mobile, often having personal contact with extension stations in states other than his own. Further, the opinion leader must be viewed as a reliable source of information. Mere knowledge is not enough; one must exercise his knowledge to include interpretation and to exclude manipulation. And, second, the opinion leader must be available. Mere membership in organizations, for instance, to increase contact is not enough; one must be approachable, with the ability to relate to others.

See Reed H. Blake, "Toward a Convergence of Theory: Opinion Leadership Characteristics," in Blake (ed.), Studies in Communication (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1968), pp. 52-63.

too, is supported by age. In fact, in determining social rank, age is probably more important than authority coming from some social position.⁶

What is evident in the Turkish village, as opposed to the United States, is that the influential tends to come from the formal positions in the village, the muhtars, the hojas, the school teachers, the doctors, etc., rather than the informal positions, and within these categories there is a structuring of influence based on age. (In folk societies age has traditionally been honored, for it represents experience and, hence, knowledge.)

A specific example of how the more informed village men may pass on information and opinions to other, less active individuals is provided by the following:

Abdil Handanoglu, an illiterate villager, said he got news from listening to others read the papers in the coffee houses as well as listening to radio and watching television. He reported that he goes

⁶Nermin Erdentug, A Study of the Social Structure of a Turkish Village, Publication No. 130 (Ankara: Faculty of Languages, History and Geography, University of Ankara, 1959), p. 50.

to the coffee house at least once a day--as he has time from his farming chores.

"When I see someone reading a newspaper, I say, 'Read it loudly, I want to listen to you.'"

Who reads the newspapers there?

"The one who can read the best or clearest. He reads and the others listen."

Does the reader explain the news?

"He does it. He tells his friends. He explains it."

Osman Aylik is a muhtar. He reported that he reads several daily newspapers, listens to radio and watches TV in a coffee house. Two of the papers he reads are Hurriyet, Turkey's largest, and Milliyet, perhaps the country's most respected newspaper, both published in Istanbul.

Does Aylik relay the news to others?

"If the news is very important, I speak to ten, twenty, thirty or more people--whatever I find in the group at the time."

Does he explain the meaning of the news?

"Sometimes, if it must be."

Do many people come to the muhtar for advice and information?

"If one has difficulties in agriculture, he goes to the agriculture

teacher. If it is love, he goes to the muhtar. On a question of health, he goes to the doctor. Whenever there is a question, he goes to the people who know it better."

Ibrahim Oguz is a 40-year old farmer in the Irgi village near Barbaros. He also operates a roadside coffee house on the main highway and subscribes to Turkey's nationally circulated farming magazine, Ciftlik, and to a journal published in Izmir, The Village Economy. His exposure to the media concerned with agriculture, his availability in the coffee house, and his age make him a prime candidate for an influential in the area of farming. He reported that about seven people a day seek him out for advice.

One of Akyurt's influentials is Refik Alan, an aggressive young village school teacher, who confirmed that he passes news on to others in the village. For example, he relayed news that fertilizer demonstrations would be held in the village. He had learned of this coming event directly from attending a meeting in Ankara.

In Lerner's model type, messages in oral system societies usually emanated from sources authorized to speak by their place in the social hierarchy, i.e., by status rather than skill criteria. They were transmitted through oral channels to highly differentiated audiences--

the "natural" primary groups of kinship, worship, work, or play. On the other hand, media systems were staffed by a professional corps of communicators, skilled in producing messages for transmission through the impersonal mass media to relatively undifferentiated mass audiences.

What one finds in the Turkish village are elements of the two systems.

Normally, the message initially originates within a complex organization involving a professional corp of communicators. However, the message itself becomes viable to its audience only as it is refracted through the village influentials. These influentials are authorized to speak by virtue of their place in the social structure (which is more common to the oral systems) than by some skill criteria. Yet, certain professional requisites must be present, i.e., the ability to read well the newspaper aloud, for instance. Finally, these oral channels address themselves to the "natural" primary groups, as Lerner identifies them, rather than to some kind of secondary grouping.

In summary, there is strong evidence of a two-step flow of communication in the Turkish village. The role of the influential in this process is the same in the traditional Turkish village as that identified in other studies: as a mediator and interpreter of news. In social characteristics, however, there are some differences in the village

influential. For instance, his position in the village social structure greatly determines his chances for being an opinion leader. In fact, some social positions, for instance, the muhtar and the hoja, are almost thrust into the role. Yet at the same time, characteristics of the influentials (from other studies) such as social gregariousness, social mobility, education, and the like, also have a bearing on the village influential.

Conclusion

For the approximately four out of every five Turks who live in the villages, there are two major elements which act in concert in the transmission of his news: the coffee house as a communication link and the influential as a refractor of news. Taken together, these two elements can be viewed as a communication relay channel.⁷ This relay channel, as would be expected in a country in transition, displays characteristics of both oral communication societies and media communication

⁷Among others, one of the unexplored aspects of the relay channel is that, in larger villages containing several coffee houses, the relay channels may provide a type of selective exposure. For instance, one Turk in Gaziemir stated: "If you speak to someone and he believes you belong to his party he listens to you. But not if you are from an opposition party." Gaziemir is a village of 10,000 people. It has several coffee houses. In the more heterogeneous villages, do men (influentials-influencees) of similar sympathies frequent common houses, and, in turn, shun still other houses not of their ideological learnings?

societies. But above all, the relay channel is conceptualized here as perhaps the most vital of all links in the communication networks in the hinterland of this country. Further investigations are needed to delve further into this aspect of human communication.